Productive Sidewalks, the case of New York

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Abstract:

Recent phenomena of increasing corporatisation and touristification of urban space (Zukin, 2009; Muñoz, 2008), together with a growing emphasis on developing urban projects that depend exclusively on commercial and leisure programs, lead to the question whether how we can still keep our cities productive and affordable? To achieve this, we need to retain productivity as a condition for growth to ensure the city's diversity and vitality, its environmental balance and social well-being, hence providing employment and entrepreneurial opportunities that can diminish poverty and enhance social equality.

Sidewalks define street life (Mehta 2007; Ford 2000) and can be the spaces to maintain or introduce productivity to the city: these are the places of encounter for families, neighbors and strangers, where a delicate but essential relationship is established between public and private properties (Dovey & Wood, 2015). Nevertheless, sidewalks are also part of **urban productive systems**, linking residential with commercial and industrial activities: they are collective spaces (de Solà-Morales, 1992; Avermaete & Teerds, 2007: Scheerlinck, 2013) that often provide a platform for retail and industry to unfold itself, based on a high interaction with citizens. A thorough research on productive sidewalks however is necessary: how do sidewalks contribute to the productive city? What are the economic processes that define the productivity and how are they translated into spatial qualities?

Keywords: *Productivity, Sidewalks, Informal economy, Collective Space*

1. Introduction

‘Early twenty-first-century U.S. sidewalks are highly regulated spaces where regulations govern almost every activity but walking. Although they are formally regulated by municipalities, sidewalks are als informally controlled by the occupants of abutting properties. Often the exercise of these informal property rights on the sidewalks clash with the claims exercised on the same sidewalks by other social groups. These property rights are informal as they are not reflected in deeds of trust or condoned by contracts or laws.’ (Loukaitou-Sideris and Ehrenfeucht, 2014)

The notion that public spaces are “the people’s property” (Staeheli and Mitchel 2008) and should be “relatively open to a range of people and behaviors” (Staeheli, Mitchel, and Nagel 2009:634) has led many scholars to critique attempts to exert private interests over public spaces. The debate on the relationship between property ownership over public space started almost two decades ago. “Detailed accounts have shown how privatization of public space provision (Loukaitou-Sideris and Banerjee 1998, Sorkin 1992) and management through business improvement districts (BIDs) or public-private partnerships (Smith 1996; Zukin 1995) can make public spaces less open and accessible.” (Loukaitou-Sideris and Ehrenfeucht, 2014)

Unlike other public destinations like beaches, squares, or parks, sidewalks directly border abutters’ front yards and businesses. This proximity creates a functional, symbolic, and ongoing interdependence between the sidewalk and the private properties that abut them. In the case of New York City, sidewalks function as front yard *and* a public space. These sidewalks have a daily impact on the adjoining properties or businesses. Some of the actives may have a negative impact (noise, litter or congestion) that affect the property owners’ sense of well-being. The proximity and reflection of the activity between public and private property underlies the actions and interactions of abutters (the owner of and adjoining property) and other sidewalk users. This also leads them to make special claims on the sidewalk that front their property, use those sidewalks for their own purposes and in different ways than other citizens, and exercise their own informal control. Through new models on productivity, we question how sidewalks contribute to the productive city.

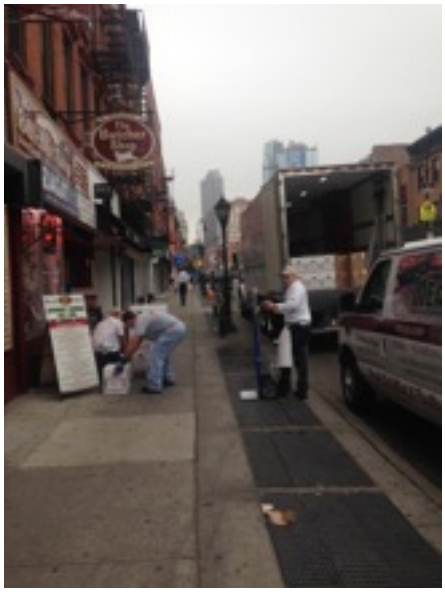

Figure 1: Loading suitcases into the cab, using a trolley in front of the hotel. The canopy, signage and the different pavement, designates the area as part of the hotel. Photograph by Hannes Van Damme.

Figure 2: Unloading meat in front of the butcher shop. Photograph by Hannes Van Damme.

Figure 3: Adding plants on casters to beautify their sidewalk to beautify for potential customers. Photograph by Hannes Van Damme.

Figure 4: Abutters who upgrade the space around a tree to a small green planter, East Village, Manhattan. Photograph by Hannes Van Damme.

2. New models of productivity

2.1. Industrial urban landscapes

In **industrial urban landscapes**, **people work**: productive areas include a wide range of users, requirements, needs and routines, not always avoiding a more bold appropriation (or even misappropriation) of the city's public spaces. The overlap or integration of productive activities on sidewalks can be essential to guarantee its survival within the city, which seems to push manufacturing and industry to peri-urban areas. Nevertheless, discourses on the use and appropriation of sidewalks too often only highlight the romantic and poetic side of residential or commercial scenarios especially, not dealing with more complex and harsh environments where programmatic adjacencies are not that evident. New York City is an interesting example of how productive sidewalks became a substantial part of the economic system, not always drawing romantic scenarios of urbanity: New York proved to be able to absorb successfully the combination of manufacturing, residential and commercial activities, manifested on its sidewalks in the case of the Gowanus area, Brooklyn. It also invites a further research and provide insights on how these configurations perform and give meaning to a bigger economic system.

The Gowanus Canal area in New York (Brooklyn) is one of theses industrial urban landscapes. It is an intriguing area due to its abrupt boundaries and introvert relationship

between the manufacturing activities and its streetscape. This area proved to be able to absorb successfully the combination of manufacturing, housing, commercial activities, educational and sport facilities, manifested in the area's streetscapes. In this neighborhood, sidewalks are shared by workers residents as well as visitors, exhibiting an urban model of shared streetscapes in a highly diverse and often harsh appearing neighborhood.

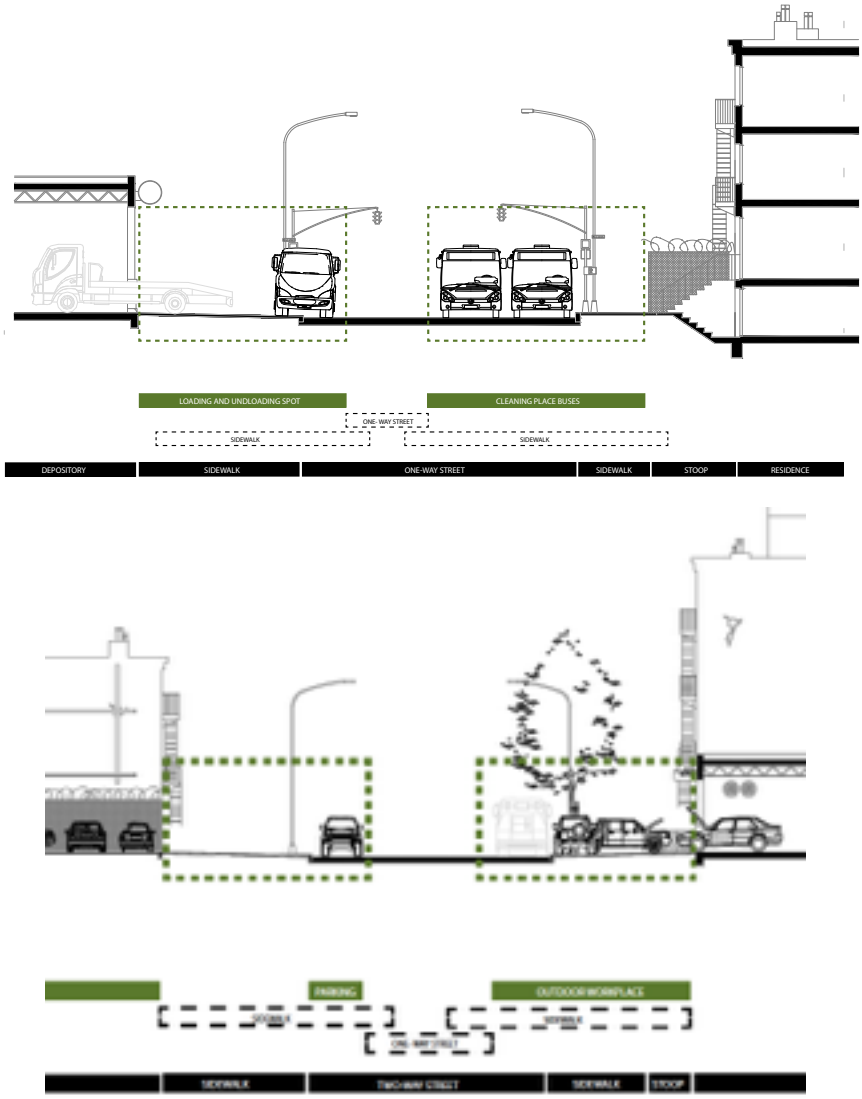

Figure 5 & 6: Industrial urban landscape: Street section of temporary and undefined manufacturing activities taking place on the sidewalks. Photograph by Hannes Van Damme.

The existing situation (represented in the sections above/below), demonstrate how territorial organization and temporary or systematic overlap of manufacturing activity interacts with the streetscape. At the same time, blockage or narrowing of pedestrian pass ways because of the present productivity (loading, unloading, parking etc) is common and accepted as normal. In other words, existing streets and sidewalks are defended, challenged or negotiated territories: in the Gowanus area, streetscapes seem to be adapted towards a temporary and undefined productive space. The character and strength of the Gowanus neighborhood is indeed defined by the overlap use and appropriation of the streetscape and adds a social and economical valuable contribution to the environment (Van Damme, 2013). The difference between the initially planned and

the final appropriated space contributes to a higher level of productivity and to a more vibrant streetscape.

Figure 7,8,9,10 &11: Productive sidewalks in industrial urban landscapes on Butler Street, Gowanus, New York. Photographs by Hannes Van Damme.

The poetic dimension and honesty within the Gowanus area depends on the spatial arrangement and the configuration of collective uses within the streetscape (Scheerlinck, 2013). The Gowanus area demonstrates perfectly how territorial organizations and temporary or systematic overlap of industrial activity can interact with the streetscape, without leading to constant conflict or tension. This area proves that the sidewalks are a spatial contribution to a more productivity city.

2.2. Residential urban landscapes

Within the residential urban landscape, people live and work. Small young starting businesses often take place in a guest bedroom or living room. Local artists or craftsmen even extend in front or back yards to expose or exhibit their activity to other neighbors.

Front yards are great hosts for many different activities like garage sales that take part on any given weekend, somewhere in the United States. “Collecting and sorting used possessions and unwanted household items from their basements, garages, attics and closets are evaluated and priced before displaying them on their lawn, driveway, porch or front steps” (Crawford, 2014). These sales **in front of their houses** are one of the most ubiquitous yet little-studied dimensions of the informal economy. In spite of their pervasive presence, garage sales are economically invisible. “Their very ordinariness allows them to exist largely under the radar as a form of commercial exchange that takes place outside of the formal economy and is largely unrecorded by official statistics… However, garage sales challenge a surprising number of economic, social and spatial conventions”(Crawford, 2014). Organized in ordinary settings such as front yards and sidewalks, the sales invert these areas. It transforms spaces that are normally private into extremely public and open to anyone. Once these would become more permanent, they could have the potential to reshape urban values and urban spaces.

Garage sales do have a paradoxical nature: these are public events that take place in private, social events masquerading as a commercial activity as well as it opposite. They simultaneously celebrate informal economy, spatial organizations and property structures and social connectors. Through flyers, newspapers or online posts, strangers or partial strangers are invited and accepted into their private spaces for the duration of the event. Depending on the density and spatial configurations of the city the sales are moved onto the streets, sidewalks, front yards or basement floor apartments.

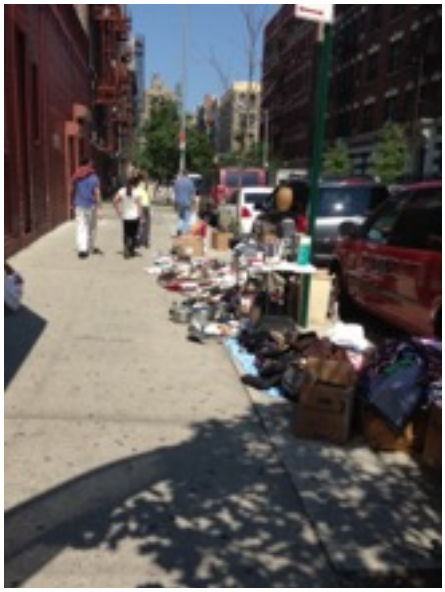

Figure 12 & 13: A spontaneous garage sale on the sidewalk in Carroll Gardens, Brooklyn. Figure 3: On of the daily unorganized stoop sales in Washington Heights, Manhattan. Photographs by Hannes Van Damme.

“Planners have already recognized the usefulness of the sociability generated by garage sales by adopting them as a “community-building” technique, with the goal of increasing social capital. They organize block, street or entire neighborhood front yard sales with the explicit purpose of connecting neighbors through a common endeavor” (Crawford, 2014)

In this example on new models of productivity, the sidewalk, front yard or doorsteps are able to host a series of informal activities that lead to a social coherence and an economical enforcement of the city. Apart from that, the changing spatial configuration and the changing boundary between public and private space, does create a more vibrant streetscape.

2.3. Commercial urban landscapes

“Informality is enjoying renewed attention now, partially within the united states, as the economic downturn has forced many to make ends meet outside the traditional, formal economy. Some rent out a room in their home illegally. Others scavenge and run perpetual garage sales on their front lawn. Still others turn to selling things on the street.” (Kettles, 2014) **Vending on the streets** started around 1880s in New York City and is one of the most visible example of informal economies taking place on public space. Today, New York City has an estimated 13,000 street vendors, working within the formal or informal economy. Different from other productive models on the sidewalks, street vending is subject of numerous regulations that often deal with the spatial configuration of the activity.

Street vending has proven to be a successful economic development tool, providing jobs and entrepreneurial opportunities to those with limited resources. The pictures bellow (Figure 14 &15) shows the Romps family business that has spread christmas trees over the length of two city blocks, in two by four (feet) wooden racks that they have built to keep the trees out of the way of pedestrians. ‘On the curb you can find saw and clippers, and an assortment of stands that New Yorkers will buy and use to mount trees in their apartments. The Romps have set up in accordance with Local Law 17 of 1984, which states, “Peddlers may sell and display coniferous trees during the month of December….but in any such case the permission of the owner of the premises fronting on such sidewalk shall first be obtained.” The family has received the necessary permission from the West Village Committee, which administers the Jane Street Community Garden that fronts this sidewalk.’ (Duneier M, 1999)

The sidewalk may not have been designed for such a commercial activity, but somehow everything works neat and orderly. These is always a clear, if narrow, pedestrian path. The Romps deliver the trees in the neighborhood for free to keep local happy with their presence.

Figure 14 & 15: Selling christmas trees on the sidewalks. Ranked by size, they temporary overlap the sidewalks along the block. Photograph by Hannes Van Damme.

In some cases, these productive overlap scenarios in a more direct way on the sidewalks are not welcomed by the city's government. Lately New York City's government is raising prospects on the activities happening on Times Square Pedestrian Plazas. The plazas, which replaced portions of Broadway and Seventh Avenue, have come under new scrutiny after a proliferation of street performers (Grynbaum, 2015)

Figure 16 & 17: Animated figures or topless tip seekers on Times Square Plaza, NY. Photography by Nicole Bengiveno for the New York Times.

Not only shop owners, commerces or street vendors are looking to make money on the streets or sidewalks, the city and BIDs also do. This photograph (figure 18) bellow shows the example of a steel clad number 9 installed in front of the 9 West 57th street a few decades ago not just to identify the address of the distinctive sloped tower, but to distract the bare walls of the adjacent building and attract the people on the sidewalk to their business. "For the privilege of parking this three-ton, nine-foot tall numeral on the sidewalk, the property owner pays the city $12,000 a year. The Grand Hyatt New York, which adjoins Grand Central Terminal, is billed nearly $300,000 annually by the city because its mezzanine-level restaurant protrudes over the sidewalk on East 42nd Street." (Robrechts, 2016)

‘Annually the city collects about $60 million for allowing signage, ornamental lampposts, stand alone clocks, benches, bollards,planters, permanent trash receptacles, delivery ramps and just about anything else imaginable on, over or under the city’s 12,000 miles of sidewalks. It is also hard to miss the nearly 16-foot Electric Time Company clock that has stood sentinel in front of 725 Fifth Avenue for years, but neither the Trump Organization nor the city has been able to confirm that the $300 annual bill for the clock’s setting had been paid.”’ (Robrechts, 2016)

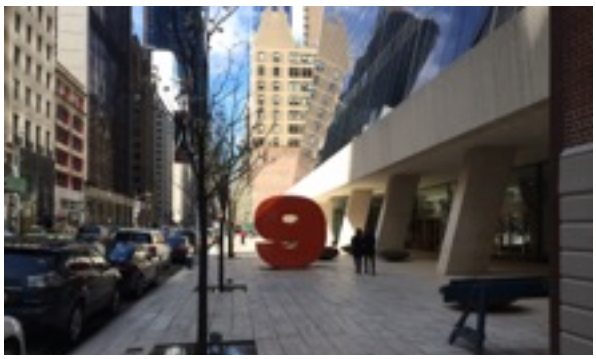

Figure 18: Hidden signs of productivity on the 57th Street sidewalk. Photograph by Hannes Van Damme.

Within the commercial models of productivity, both business owners as local authorities use the sidewalks as a spatial extension of their productive activities.

4. Conclusion

New York City is an interesting example of how productive sidewalks became a substantial part of the economic system, not always drawing romantic scenarios of urbanity: New York proved to be able to absorb successfully the combination of manufacturing, residential and commercial activities. Within the different models of productivity, we notice that the sidewalk has a spatial, social or economical contribution to a more productive city. This contribution takes place mostly unplanned on a daily or weekly bases by shop owners, abutters, residents, passing people or workers that are actors in this temporary productive city landscape. The research through sidewalks samples learns that the very overlap -planned or uncontrolled- of these productive activities adds quality to the built environment as it embraces multiplicity and variety within the city's streetscape. These characteristics can be considered as necessary ingredients for a tolerant and vibrant city, even if recently a tendency of separating and avoiding overlaps can be noticed. The research results suggest to actively take into account these unplanned productive use of sidewalks in the planning, design and monitoring of collective spaces in New York and abroad.

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Hannes Van Damme is an architect and researcher living and working in Ghent, Belgium. He collaborated and facilitated in expositions and workshops on Streetscape Territories research projects hosted at the New York Pratt Institute and KU Leuven, Faculty of Architecture. He worked within the project team of Terreform, a non-profit institute founded by Michael Sorkin and dedicated to research into the forms and practices of just and sustainable urbanism.
Currently he is working as an academic researcher within the research group of Streetscape Territories and also starting a doctoral research titled 'Productive Urban Landscapes, New York: Achieving Critical Insight in the transformation of Contemporary collective spaces'. The PhD combines his local expertise and the research he already obtained in New York on the use and appropriation of sidewalks.

Kris Scheerlinck studied Architecture and Urban Design in Ghent, Leuven and Barcelona where he obtained his PhD. He is Associated Professor at the Faculty of Architecture, KU Leuven where he is Vice Dean for International Affairs and Head of the Research Group Urban Projects, Collective Spaces and Local Identities. He directs Streetscape Territories, a research project focusing on the transformation of the urban fabric with streetscapes as its protagonist. He ran his own research and design practice with projects in Barcelona, Porto, Brussels, Ghent, New York, Milan and Madrid.

Yves Schoonjans is a Professor in architectural history and - theory at the University of Leuven (Department & Faculty of Architecture), Belgium His research is structured in two lines (1) Practices and discourses in a recent and contemporary context – relation between theory and practices; and (2) Everyday local identity, appropriation and urban development. In 2013 together with Kris Scheerlinck he initiated the 'Urban Projects, Collective Spaces and Local Identities' research group. Since 1999 he has an extensive experience in academic management with large responsibilities. Today he is Vice-chair research Department of Architecture (2013-) and acting chair of the campus Brussels/Ghent (2013-).